



## Communicative Challenges and Strategies in English During Cultural Workshops for International Students

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### Abstract

This research consists purposes were 1. to identify the main communicative challenges Vietnamese international students experienced when using English during Thai cultural workshops 2. to examine the strategies students used to cope with communication breakdowns in English-mediated workshop interaction and 3. to explore perceived outcomes of participation from student and instructor perspectives. This study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. The research instruments included a pre-workshop questionnaire, a post-workshop questionnaire, semi-structured student interviews, short instructor interviews, and observation checklists. The sample group consisted of Vietnamese international students and workshop instructors participating in Thai cultural workshops at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, including 48 students in the pre-workshop survey, 31 students in the post-workshop survey, 14 students in semi-structured interviews, 4 instructors in short interviews and 3 observed workshops: Muay Thai, Thai music and pottery-making. Quantitative data were analyzed using percentage, mean, and standard deviation, while qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed through thematic analysis. The research results found that 1) the main communicative challenges were limited vocabulary (54.20% in the pre-workshop survey; 67.70% in the post-workshop survey), pronunciation difficulties (29.20%; 45.20%) and listening-related difficulty associated with accent and speech rate 2) students mainly used body language and gestures (75.00%; 74.20%), translation applications (39.60%; 74.20%), peer support (29.00%), and clarification from instructors (25.80%) to maintain communication, while avoidance of speaking decreased to 3.20% after the workshops and 3) students reported improved confidence in using English after participation, with post-workshop confidence at a moderate level ( $\bar{x} = 3.26$ , S.D. = 1.03), 87.10% reporting increased confidence and overall strategy effectiveness rated highly ( $\bar{x} = 4.00$ , S.D. = 0.93). The findings indicate that English-mediated cultural workshops can support EFL



communication development when instructors provide clear scaffolding, vocabulary support, demonstrations, and structured opportunities for clarification.

**Keywords:** EFL Communication, Cultural Workshops, Coping Strategies

## Introduction

During the current era of globalization, cultural seminars are crucial venues for individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact and exchange knowledge. Instruction is often conducted in English, facilitating foreign students' understanding of many cultures while also enhancing their language proficiency (Holliday, 2021). However, for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, communication in such settings can be difficult. Vietnamese students, in particular, may face limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and unfamiliarity with cultural nuances, all of which can affect engagement and learning outcomes (Gong et al., 2021). English has become the dominant language in academia and international exchange programs (Fantini, 2020), yet many international students still struggle with real-life communication because of limited exposure to spontaneous interaction (Heng, 2019). Linguistic barriers such as grammatical errors, difficulty understanding accents, and lack of confidence can hinder participation in discussions and cultural activities (Ho, 2020). Communication is also shaped by cultural expectations: Vietnamese culture often values politeness and indirectness (Martirosyan & Bustamantea, 2019), while Thai culture emphasizes hierarchy, face-saving communication, politeness markers, and respectful gestures such as the wai (Paitoonpong & Chalamwong, 2021). These norms may increase hesitation to ask questions or participate actively, thereby limiting meaningful interaction with instructors and peers (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

Such difficulties may become more pronounced in cultural workshops, where students must communicate while performing unfamiliar activities. Vietnamese learners often come from educational backgrounds that emphasize reading and writing more than spoken interaction, which can make spontaneous communication and real-time response more difficult (Chand, 2021). They may also struggle to interpret cultural cues, leading to miscommunication or discomfort in social interaction (Ayedoun et al., 2019). In activities such as Muay Thai, Thai music and pottery workshops, language anxiety may further reduce participation when students fear making mistakes in English (Lai et al., 2023). This is significant because language anxiety has been recognized as a barrier to effective communication in immersive settings (Porras, 2020). In addition, specialized vocabulary related to arts or martial arts may create extra difficulty when students are unfamiliar with the terms needed to follow instructions and express themselves clearly (Holliday, 2021).



Despite these challenges, students often use strategies to maintain communication. Nonverbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, can help bridge language gaps (Fantini, 2020), while translation applications, online dictionaries, and voice-to-text tools can support real-time understanding (Ayedoun et al., 2019). Peer support and collaborative interaction may also reduce pressure and create a safer environment for using English (Ho, 2020), and some students use code-switching with peers who share the same first language (Chand, 2021). Educational institutions, program organizers, and facilitators can further support students through language preparation, cross-cultural communication support, structured peer mentoring, and inclusive teaching methods that reduce anxiety and encourage participation (Martirosyan & Bustamantea, 2019; Holliday, 2021). By identifying the communicative challenges Vietnamese students face and the strategies they use to manage them, this study contributes to improving English-mediated cultural workshops and informing more effective language preparation, interactive learning strategies, and culturally sensitive teaching approaches (Katan & Taibi, 2021). For this reason, the present study investigates the communicative challenges encountered by Vietnamese international students during Thai cultural workshops conducted in English, as well as the strategies they use to cope with those challenges.

### The Purposes

1. To identify the main communicative challenges Vietnamese international students experience when using English during Thai cultural workshops
2. To examine the strategies students use to cope with communication breakdowns in English-mediated workshop interaction

To explore perceived outcomes of participation (e.g., confidence and willingness to communicate) from student and instructor perspectives

### Literary Review

In EFL contexts, learners often have limited exposure to spontaneous interaction outside the classroom. This can constrain fluency, listening agility, and confidence when learners enter authentic communication environments (Heng, 2019). Studies of communicative competence and classroom-oriented interaction similarly suggest that learners may struggle with speaking and listening demands when communication is fast-paced or involves unfamiliar accents (Ho, 2020). Listening difficulties in EFL settings are also frequently linked to speech rate, pronunciation variation, and limited exposure to natural spoken input, which can reduce comprehension and slow response time during real-time activities (Nushi and Orouji, 2020).



Intercultural communicative competence frameworks emphasize that successful interaction requires linguistic resources and the ability to manage communication across cultural norms and expectations (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2020). Differences in politeness conventions and face-saving practices may influence whether learners feel comfortable asking questions, interrupting or participating actively in group settings. In EFL learning environments, anxiety is also a central factor: foreign language anxiety has been shown to reduce willingness to communicate and may lead learners to avoid speaking, especially when they fear negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986; Teimouri et al., 2019). These affective and sociocultural pressures may become more visible in intercultural workshops where learners must coordinate language use with action and collaboration.

To cope with communication problems, learners draw on communication strategies deliberate moves used to maintain interaction and convey meaning despite linguistic gaps. Foundational strategy work highlights common interactional repairs such as paraphrase, appeal for assistance, and nonverbal communication (Tarone, 1980; Færch and Kasper, 1983). Later syntheses clarified definitions and taxonomies of strategy use, including achievement and avoidance strategies, time-gaining devices and interactional strategies that support negotiation of meaning (Dörnyei and Scott, 1997). Recent EFL studies continue to show that learners rely heavily on strategy combinations during speaking and task interaction for example, asking for clarification, confirmation checks, and peer support especially when vocabulary is limited or fluency is low (Kongsom, 2016). Technology-based strategies are increasingly common; translation tools and online dictionaries can provide immediate meaning support and help learners continue participating when vocabulary gaps occur (Ayedoun et al., 2019). Overall, prior research suggests that scaffolded interaction, inclusive facilitation and structured support can reduce anxiety and promote meaningful participation in English-mediated intercultural activities (Holliday, 2021). However, there is still a need for context-specific evidence from cultural workshop settings, where tasks are hands-on, time-sensitive and vocabulary-intensive and where learners must negotiate meaning while simultaneously performing unfamiliar cultural activities.

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative-dominant mixed evidence approach through triangulation, combining surveys, interviews, and direct observations to capture communicative challenges and strategies in workshop settings.

**1. Participants:** Participants included Vietnamese international students who joined the English-mediated Thai cultural workshops and the workshop instructors/facilitators. A total of 48 Vietnamese students completed the pre-workshop survey, and 31 Vietnamese students completed the post-workshop survey. To gain deeper insight into students' lived communication experiences, 14 students also participated in semi-structured



interviews. To triangulate student perspectives with instructional viewpoints, four workshop instructors/facilitators completed short interviews. In addition, three cultural workshop sessions Muay Thai, Thai music, and pottery-making were included for direct observation using structured checklists.

## 2. Instruments and data collection

2.1 Pre-workshop questionnaire The pre-workshop questionnaire was distributed prior to participation to gather baseline data regarding students' English usage and their perceptions of the forthcoming workshop communication. The assessment collected background information, self-assessed competency, confidence in utilizing English in workshop environments, predicted communicative obstacles (such as vocabulary, hearing, pronunciation, and interaction), and techniques students planned to employ when faced with communication difficulties. The questionnaire had a blend of rating-scale items and multiple-response questions to assess both confidence levels and anticipated difficulties.

2.2 Post-workshop questionnaire The post-workshop questionnaire was conducted following participation to assess students' actual communication experiences during the seminars. Students were requested to disclose the problems encountered, the frequency of communication difficulties, the remedies employed, and the efficacy of those tactics in facilitating ongoing participation. It also includes items regarding perceived alterations in confidence and open-ended inquiries soliciting comments and recommendations for enhancing future sessions. The questionnaire integrated rating-scale items with multiple-choice and concise open-ended questions to obtain both quantitative data and succinct explanatory insights.

2.3 Semi-structured student interviews Semi-structured interviews with students were conducted to explore communication breakdowns and coping processes in more detail than surveys could capture. The interview prompts focused on specific situations where students struggled to understand instructions or express themselves, factors affecting participation (including anxiety or hesitation), strategies used to repair communication (e.g., asking for clarification, using gestures, using translation tools), and perceived changes in confidence or willingness to communicate. The semi-structured format allowed consistent coverage of key topics while still giving students space to provide examples and elaboration.

2.4 Short instructor interviews Short instructor interviews were conducted to triangulate student-reported challenges with facilitators' perspectives during English-mediated instruction. Instructors were asked about common learner difficulties they observed, typical points where misunderstanding occurred, and the kinds of support they provided (such as simplifying language, repeating or rephrasing instructions, demonstrating steps, and encouraging students to ask questions). Instructors also shared recommendations for improving workshop design to better support EFL learners' comprehension and participation.



2.5 Observation checklists Observation checklists were used to record real-time evidence of communicative challenges, strategy use, engagement patterns, and instructional scaffolding during the cultural workshops. The checklists focused on observable indicators such as vocabulary-related breakdowns, listening difficulty, hesitation to speak, use of gestures/demonstrations, use of translation tools, peer support-seeking, self-correction, and instructor facilitation moves (e.g., repetition, rephrasing, demonstrations, encouragement). Using structured checklists supported consistent documentation across sessions and strengthened triangulation with survey and interview findings.

**3. Data analysis:** Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, SD). Interview and observation data were coded thematically to identify recurring categories of challenges, strategies, and perceived outcomes.

## Results

This Research The researcher can classify the research results as follows

This section reports findings from (1) Pre-Workshop Survey (Doc. 1; n=48), (2) Post-Workshop Survey (Doc. 2; n=31), (3) Student Semi-Structured Interviews (Doc. 3; n=14), (4) Instructor Semi-Structured Interviews (n=4), and (5) Direct Observations from three cultural workshops (Muay Thai, Thai music, and pottery-making). The pre/post surveys were collected anonymously and are treated as two independent groups (not paired). Pre-Workshop Survey Results (n = 48)

Students were mostly at beginner to intermediate levels of English, with low confidence in using English in cultural workshops ( $M = 1.90/5$ ). Their main anticipated difficulties were limited vocabulary (54.20%), peer interaction (31.30%), and pronunciation (29.20%), while the main sources of nervousness were speaking in front of a group (56.30%) and making grammar mistakes (41.70%). The most common planned coping strategies were gestures/body language (75.00%) and translation applications (39.60%).

### Participant background and prior experience

In the pre-workshop survey, most students rated their English proficiency at the beginner to intermediate level, with 52.10% identifying as intermediate, 45.80% as beginner, and only 2.10% as advanced. Their real-world English conversation practice was also limited: 35.40% reported using English occasionally, 29.20% rarely, 22.90% frequently, and 12.50% never. In terms of prior experience, 47.90% had never participated in an English-based cultural workshop, while 31.30% had participated in Thailand and 20.80% in another country. The mean frequency of daily English communication was 2.58 ( $SD = 1.05$ ), and confidence in using English in a cultural-workshop setting was low ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

Areas of low confidence and nervousness

**Table 1** Skills students felt least confident in (n = 48; multiple selections)

| Skill area | n  | Percentage |
|------------|----|------------|
| Speaking   | 23 | 47.90      |
| Listening  | 16 | 33.30      |
| Reading    | 11 | 22.90      |
| Writing    | 8  | 16.70      |
| None       | 12 | 25.00      |

**Table 2** Aspects that made students most nervous (n = 48; multiple selections)

| Nervousness trigger                   | n  | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|----|------------|
| Speaking in front of a group          | 27 | 56.30      |
| Making grammar mistakes               | 20 | 41.70      |
| Mispronouncing words                  | 9  | 18.80      |
| Understanding the instructor's accent | 8  | 16.70      |
| Responding quickly in conversation    | 6  | 12.50      |

Expected challenges and planned strategies

**Table 3** Expected communication difficulties (n = 48; multiple selections)

| Expected difficulty                             | n  | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------------------|----|------------|
| Limited vocabulary                              | 26 | 54.20      |
| Difficulty interacting with fellow participants | 15 | 31.30      |
| Pronunciation difficulties                      | 14 | 29.20      |
| Cultural misunderstandings                      | 9  | 18.80      |
| Difficulty understanding Thai instructors       | 3  | 6.30       |

**Table 4** Planned coping strategies (n = 48; multiple selections)

| Planned strategy                 | n  | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|----|------------|
| Using body language and gestures | 36 | 75.00      |

|                                           |    |      |
|-------------------------------------------|----|------|
| Using translation apps                    | 19 | 39.6 |
| Asking for clarification from instructors | 6  | 12.5 |
| Seeking help from peers                   | 5  | 10.4 |
| Avoiding speaking English                 | 5  | 10.4 |

#### Post-Workshop Survey Results (n = 31)

Students were mostly at beginner to intermediate levels of English, with low confidence in using English in cultural workshops ( $M = 1.90/5$ ). Their main anticipated difficulties were limited vocabulary (54.20%), peer interaction (31.30%), and pronunciation (29.20%), while the main sources of nervousness were speaking in front of a group (56.30%) and making grammar mistakes (41.70%). The most common planned coping strategies were gestures/body language (75.00%) and translation applications (39.60%).

Challenges experienced and how often they occurred

**Table 5** Biggest challenges experienced (n = 31; multiple selections)

| Challenge experienced                           | n  | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------------------|----|------------|
| Limited vocabulary                              | 21 | 67.70      |
| Pronunciation difficulties                      | 14 | 45.20      |
| Cultural misunderstandings                      | 4  | 12.90      |
| Difficulty interacting with fellow participants | 3  | 9.70       |
| Difficulty understanding Thai instructors       | 3  | 9.70       |

Frequency of communication difficulties (Likert 1–5):  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$

Strategies used and perceived effectiveness

**Table 6** Strategies used during workshops (n = 31; multiple selections)

| Strategy used                             | n  | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------------|----|------------|
| Using body language and gestures          | 23 | 74.20      |
| Using translation apps                    | 23 | 74.20      |
| Seeking help from peers                   | 9  | 29.00      |
| Asking for clarification from instructors | 8  | 25.80      |
| Avoiding speaking English                 | 1  | 3.20       |

Perceived strategy effectiveness (Likert 1–5): M = 4.00, SD = 0.93

#### Confidence and overall evaluation

Post-workshop confidence in using English was moderate (M = 3.26, SD = 1.03), and 87.1% of students reported increased confidence; willingness to recommend the workshop was high (M = 4.68, SD = 0.65).

#### Open-ended responses (post survey)

Of 24 responses on unexpected difficulties, most reported no unexpected difficulties (15), while a few mentioned accent or speech-rate difficulty, technical constraints, or other varied issues. Suggestions for future workshops most often emphasized more English practice or training (7), more interaction opportunities (4), vocabulary preparation (3), multilingual support (2), and clearer orientation or instructions (1).

#### Student interviews (n = 14)

Student interviews supported the survey findings by showing that the main challenges were limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulty, listening load, and speaking anxiety. Students often hesitated to interrupt or ask for repetition when instructions were fast or accented, and they mainly relied on translation tools, gestures or demonstrations, and help from peers or instructors. Many also reported greater comfort and willingness to communicate by the end of the sessions.

#### Instructor interviews (n = 4)

Instructors reported that students commonly struggled with limited vocabulary, listening comprehension, and confidence when speaking. Instructors observed that students frequently relied on translation tools and nonverbal communication, and that learners often sought help from peers before approaching instructors. Instructors reported using support strategies such as simplifying language, repeating/rephrasing, demonstrating steps, and encouraging students to ask questions. Recommendations included providing key vocabulary beforehand, giving short and clear instructions, and building more structured opportunities for learners to practice speaking in low-pressure ways.



Direct observations (3 workshops)

Across the three observed workshops, common challenges included vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, listening comprehension, and occasional misinterpretation of instructions, especially when task terms were unfamiliar. Common strategies included gestures/demonstration, translation tools, support-seeking, and self-correction, with participation often increasing as sessions progressed. Instructor scaffolding was visible through repeated explanations, rephrasing, demonstrations, and encouragement.

Cross-source convergence

Across all sources, three patterns were consistent: Vocabulary was the most persistent challenge (general and task-specific). Pronunciation and listening formed a second major barrier, often linked to accent and speed of instruction. Students increasingly used translation tools and help-seeking, while avoidance decreased, alongside improved confidence.

## Conclusion

This Research The researcher can summarize the results of the research study according to the following The Purposes

This study examined how Vietnamese international students managed English communication during Thai cultural workshops. Overall, the findings show that students faced real communicative pressure in English especially when they needed specific words quickly, had to follow spoken instructions in real time, and felt uncertain about speaking in front of others. Even so, most participants stayed involved by drawing on multiple coping strategies, and many reported greater confidence after the workshops. In line with the three research purposes, the conclusions are as follows: Communicative challenges during the workshops The main challenges were vocabulary limitations (especially workshop-specific terms), followed by pronunciation and listening comprehension difficulties in real-time instruction, as well as anxiety-related hesitation to speak.

Strategies used to cope with communication breakdowns Students rarely relied on a single solution. Instead, they coped through a combination of translation tools, nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures and demonstrations), and help-seeking from peers and instructors to maintain participation and complete tasks. Perceived outcomes of participation Most students perceived improved confidence and a stronger willingness to communicate after participation. This improvement was supported by instructor scaffolding (e.g., repeating/rephrasing, demonstrations, encouragement) and the hands-on nature of the workshop tasks, which helped students understand meaning even when English was limited. Overall, the findings suggest that cultural workshops can be valuable EFL learning spaces when communication is supported through clear instructional



scaffolding, targeted vocabulary preparation and a learning atmosphere where asking questions and making mistakes are treated as normal parts of participation.

## Discussion

This Research The researcher can discuss the research results as follows

This study examined how Vietnamese international students managed English communication during Thai cultural workshops by drawing on surveys, interviews, instructor perspectives, and observations. Overall, the findings support EFL research showing that learners often face difficulty when moving from classroom English to spontaneous interaction, especially in settings with high lexical demands (Heng, 2019; Ho, 2020). Across all data sources, vocabulary gaps particularly activity-specific terms were the most frequent source of communication breakdown. This suggests that English-mediated cultural workshops are authentic but lexically demanding learning spaces in which learners must understand situated language to follow procedures and participate successfully (Holliday, 2021).

Pronunciation and listening comprehension formed a second major challenge, especially in relation to accent familiarity and natural speech rate. This is consistent with previous findings that accent comprehension and confidence can limit participation in English-mediated interaction (Ho, 2020). Because English often functions as a lingua franca in intercultural settings, learners may encounter a wider range of accents, which increases listening load and slows response time (Fantini, 2020; Heng, 2019). In addition, surveys and interviews showed that speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes influenced participation, supporting research that foreign language anxiety reduces willingness to communicate and encourages avoidance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Teimouri et al., 2019). Cultural communication norms may further intensify hesitation, particularly when students are reluctant to interrupt instructors or ask for repetition in face-sensitive contexts (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2020).

To manage these difficulties, students used a practical combination of translation tools, nonverbal communication, and help-seeking from peers or instructors. This aligns with research on communication strategies and technology support in EFL contexts, where translation tools can help learners continue participating despite vocabulary limitations (Oxford, 1990; Ayedoun et al., 2019). The findings also indicate a shift from intention to practice: translation-app use increased after participation, while avoidance decreased. Finally, confidence improved for most participants despite moderate communication difficulty. This may be explained by the workshops' multimodal nature and instructor scaffolding, such as demonstrations, repetition, rephrasing, and encouragement, which made input more comprehensible and participation less risky. In this



sense, the findings support recommendations that inclusive facilitation and structured support can strengthen engagement in English-mediated intercultural programs (Holliday, 2021).

### Discoveries or new knowledge

This study provides triangulated evidence that cultural workshops can operate as EFL-rich interactional spaces when instructional input is scaffolded. A key contribution is documenting a clear strategy shift from anticipated to actual practice: translation-app use increased markedly after participation, while avoidance decreased and help-seeking increased. The findings highlight how task-specific vocabulary demand and multimodal instruction (demonstration, repetition/rephrasing) help sustain participation during English-mediated cultural activities.

### Suggestion

Practitioners and program organizers may use these findings to provide brief vocabulary preparation and simple clarification phrases before each session, particularly for activity-specific terms that may hinder participation.

Instructors and facilitators may apply the results by using clear, predictable, and step-by-step instructional routines, with short chunks of input, slower pacing for complex procedures, and frequent comprehension checks.

Educational institutions and workshop organizers may use the findings to establish a supportive learning environment that encourages peer support and normalizes asking for clarification, thereby reducing anxiety and increasing students' willingness to participate.

The results also suggest that translation tools should be treated as legitimate communication support, with appropriate guidance so that students can use them purposefully during interaction.

Those involved in designing similar programs may use these findings to develop workshop formats that combine vocabulary support, multimodal instruction, and low-pressure participation opportunities in order to strengthen English communication and learner confidence.

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